

State of the Nations

Lean Decisioning

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Each new administration in Washington quickly begins to display a special "style"—a particular habit of working, a methodology fancied by the President for accomplishing things.

The Kennedy administration already has developed what will be labeled in the history books variously as the "working group" approach, the "task force" technique, or the "vertical" method by which President Kennedy seeks counsel from subordinates, and reaches decisions.

President Eisenhower rather admired large staff discussions—the whole Cabinet assembled—and all interested parties invited to sessions of the National Security Council. President Kennedy prefers the smaller, informal luncheon, the meeting with a splinter "task force" culled out of the Cabinet, the quick session with a "working group" of three or four White House staffers.

Likewise, though Mr. Kennedy has his inner coterie of White House operators—for handling patronage, congressional liaison (including pressure on Congress!) and appointments—he has no wide-ranging chief of staff to process and filter problems and proposals before they reach him. He prefers the "vertical" system whereby, if he wishes to discuss something with a Cabinet official or an assistant secretary, he can pick up the phone and call him direct. He can reach down "vertically" to any level for conversation and information.

To explain further the Kennedy "style," let a few happenings of these first four weeks in office be cited:

The President did not enjoy going through secretaries and official layers to reach key contacts. So he had a phone installed replete with numerous push buttons and began phoning direct. Some recipients of calls gulped when they

first picked up their receiver and heard abruptly, "This is the President speaking." A few thought their leg was being pulled and were moved to respond, "Oh, yeah, and this is Khrushchev." But they got acclimatized.

This Kennedy directness has its handicaps. Occasionally a course of action will be solemnized in direct telephone conversation, and other officials who should be apprised remain in the dark for over-



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Slowing Things Up a Bit!

long periods. But it also produces quick agreement—"action this day."

The presidential habit of working with intimate groups has found expression in several White House "workshop dinners," thus far comprising "working groups" especially picked to grapple with a key problem.

Mr. Kennedy dined one evening with Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson and House Speaker Sam Rayburn, and the discussion was a general inventory of the legislative program and the strategy for implementing it.

A week earlier there was a working dinner comprising, mainly, the President, Central Intelligence Agency Director Allen Dulles, and the Defense Assistant Secretary for International Affairs, Paul Nitze.

This past week another segment of the intelligence com-

munity broke bread with the President—the team of scientific adviser Jeremiah Wiesner, national security affairs expert McGeorge Bundy, and his assistant, Walt Whitman Rostow.

This dinner lasted four hours and discussed, among other things, the whole matter of "follow through" on presidential decisions. With this week's decision to abolish the Operations Coordinating Board (a second-level assemblage of National Security Council officials entrusted with seeing to it that NSC decisions were followed up), there was need to find other ways to assure that orders were carried out. This "follow up" task now is handed to the key operating department, in many instances the State Department.

The White House team of Wiesner, Bundy, and Rostow, be it noted, is a very high-octane assemblage of intellect and experience, and President Kennedy will be consulting it frequently.

Another "task force" combination currently constituted is the seminar on Sovietology comprising Charles Bohlen, former Ambassador to Moscow, George Kennan, Moscow expert and newly appointed Ambassador to Yugoslavia, plus the Wiesner-Rostow-Bundy axis. President Kennedy has convened this group, together with United States Ambassador to Moscow Llewellyn Thompson, twice recently for decisioning on Soviet policy.

This kind of Kennedy contact with small select "working groups" will be a continuing feature of the administration. For instance, a major strike threat probably would convene Labor Secretary Arthur Goldberg, Commerce Secretary Luther Hodges, Welfare Secretary Abraham Ribicoff.

The mood is leanness, economy of motion, decision without prolonged debate.